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Attitudes towards reflective practice: emerging findings from a TQEF study

Jacqueline Stevenson and John Willott

Background and context

Reflective learning is widely discussed in higher education with 'reflection' considered one of the essential principles underlying good teaching practice. Hinett (2002) asserts that it "can be seen as both a structure to aid critical thinking and improve existing understanding and a method for promoting autonomous and deep learning through enquiry".

However, many teachers have a limited understanding of what to expect from reflective learning or how to teach students to be reflective (Moon, 1999), and there are significant barriers to overcome before many students can use opportunities to reflect on and learn from their experience. These include previous educational experience, personal problems, lack of self-worth and anxiety. Many students do not value personal knowledge and their own role in the construction of expert knowledge (Platzer et al, 2000), and our research (Stevenson & Willott, 2005; Willott & Stevenson, 2006) has indicated that those who engage most successfully with reflective practice are those whose cultural values are most closely aligned to the dominant culture of the academy. Lack of engagement may not only create tensions within communities of learning but may further alienate those who may already be marginalised or at risk of dropping out (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

The research

We are conducting a wider project on "Investigating the cross-cultural application of reflection and reflective practice" funded through the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF). This will identify models of reflective practice currently in use across the University, examine how students from diverse cultural backgrounds engage with reflective practices, and the impact this engagement has on their participation, motivation and achievement.

Here, we describe broad perceptions of reflective practice among staff and students within the Leslie Silver International Faculty and the Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education.

Methods

Following ethical approval, a web-based questionnaire was sent to all level 1 students in the International Faculty, and subsequently semi-structured interviews were held with eight students. Ten academics were interviewed across both Faculties. For administrative reasons we were unable to survey students in the Carnegie Faculty.

The questionnaires asked about reflective activities undertaken or delivered, and how they were understood or valued. Respondents were asked about the extent to which they agreed with a particular statement using a Likert scale. The questionnaires had paired questions; e.g. students were asked to comment on the statement "I understand the need for reflective practice", while academics were asked the extent to which "students understand the need for reflective practice".

All interviews and questionnaires took place during semester 2 of 2006. 67 student questionnaires and 19 academic questionnaires were returned.

Results

We have found it useful to distinguish between different components of reflective practice. There is the *principle* of reflective practice (understanding its purpose), the pedagogical *practice* of reflection (how it is taught and incorporated into the curriculum), and also the perceived *usefulness* of reflection, both its immediate value to a student's course and assessment, but also to its wider application to other areas and their future.

Attitudes towards the principles of reflection

Students and academics had similarly mixed views about the need for and purpose of reflection (Figs. 1.1 & 1.2). Comments ranged from those who saw reflection as highly useful to those who considered it of no value at all:

"To think retrospectively about tasks completed or in the process of completion and try to see if improvements can be made in the process. To avoid the items with poor payback and to enhance/improve those that are effective. Lifelong learning is a spin off of this practice" (student).

"I hate reflection! It is waste of my time. I will have worse marks because of this stupid portfolio! I was busy making up my weak points and how reflection on them helped me instead of studying hard for my exams, which are important for me" (student).

Academics felt that students would be less convinced of the need for and purpose of reflection than they actually were ("[students] almost never understand the purpose of reflection in the start"). Students actually saw reflection somewhat more positively than academics expected, although further discussion revealed that many students considered reflection to be of value because they had been told so by their tutors rather than having any personal commitment to it.

Attitudes towards the practice of reflection

Both academics and students had mixed views about whether students were being taught the skills they needed to be reflective (Fig. 1.3). Academics thought students found reflection uncomfortable, particularly in writing or in a group, which might account for the negative responses. In fact, although responses are mixed, students were less uncomfortable than academics supposed (Figs. 1.4, 1.5 & 1.6).

Attitudes towards the usefulness of reflection

Students were significantly less convinced than academics of the benefits of reflective practice – as learners or more broadly. This was particularly so when they were asked about how the development of reflection and reflective learning might impact on their learning and in their coursework (Figs. 1.7 – 1.11).

Although not exclusively so, during interviews comments from academics were generally more positive than those from students:

"It gives people a sense of control over their own learning. It's like a stepping stone approach for continuing learning. If you are unable to reflect on your learning you cannot move onto the next stepping stone...Reflection can help anchor learning" (academic).

"You constantly look back at things you know you have done. This enables you to make improvements to the way you do things in future and helps you not make as many mistakes... [but] it also makes you play the blame game, and make you need to explain your actions" (student).

A similar pattern emerged when academics and students were asked to comment on the usefulness and impact of reflection on other activities beyond their course (Figs. 1.12 – 1.14). Students are unconvinced about the value of reflective practice to their employability (Fig. 1.15), with one student commenting that "*it's pointless. All pointless*". This contrasts sharply with academic beliefs that "*the value is in them reflecting and analysing their learning to take into the workplace. Therefore it's a major employability skill and employers want reflective employees*"

(academic) views also held by bodies, such as the Higher Education Academy and a range of authors in the field (Brockbank et al, 2002; Moon, 2004).

Summary and recommendations

Our research has identified a similar range of responses from academics and students to questions about the principles and teaching practice of reflection. While clearly there is work to be done to ensure more students understand reflective practice and have the skills and support they need to feel comfortable using it in their course, at least there appears to be some appreciation of the issues by academics.

More problematical are the significant discrepancies between how the usefulness of reflection is viewed by students and academics. It is clear that academics have over-estimated the value students place on reflective practice, and its relevance beyond the immediate curriculum. Academics were almost universally positive whilst students' responses remain mixed at best. Academics consider the development of reflection to be of significant value to students, helping them in their learning and enhancing their employability. Although academics recognise that there may be ethical issues to be considered (*"Reflective practice should come with a health warning sometimes...all your frames of reference shift, you can choose to ignore it but you can't forget it. Rita could go back to her roots but she'd never forget"*) they still consider that the benefits far outweigh any potential disadvantages. Whilst our student respondents did not include those on courses with a strong element or tradition of professional reflection (such as nursing), from the responses we did receive it is clear that students do not view reflection in such a positive light.

So where does this leave us as educators? Our data suggest that students may engage with reflective practice simply because it is necessary for academic success. Students are perceptive enough to know what will achieve good marks in assessment, and respond accordingly. If, as the literature suggests, becoming a reflective practitioner is so beneficial to employment and career development, it remains a challenge to ensure that students genuinely engage with the process.

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Figure 1: Responses to questions on reflective practice (RP) by students (shaded bars, n = 67) and staff (open bars, n = 19), where responses range from 0 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree.

